

## History of the Crusades. Episode 304. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part IX. The Battle of Tannenberg, Part 3.

Hello again. Last week we examined the build up to the Battle of Tannenberg. We saw King Jogaila decide to head to the town of Osterode in Prussia, and we saw Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen decide to race ahead with his Teutonic army to block the combined Polish-Lithuanian forces. The Teutonic army managed to catch up with the invaders when they were camped in a forest near the two villages of Tannenberg and Grunwald. The Grand Master ordered his army to form into battle lines on a nearby field, then waited for King Jogaila of Poland and Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania to gather their forces and attack the Teutonic position. However, after three hours had passed without any sign of a forthcoming attack, the Grand Master sent a herald into the forest to present an unsheathed sword to both Jogaila and Vytautas, with a message that they should stop hiding out in the forest like cowards and come out to face the Teutonic army. At the conclusion of last week's episode King Jogaila had done exactly that, giving the order for the Polish-Lithuanian army to form up and get ready to confront the waiting Teutonic fighters.

Now, the first thing which happened was: both armies burst out into song. Yes, you heard that right. As the Polish and Lithuanian armies were moving into position, the Teutonic forces started belting out the anthem of the Teutonic Order, which also happened to be the oldest hymn written in the German language. Not to be outdone, the Polish and Lithuanian fighters began singing a hymn of their own, a song imploring the Mother of God for assistance and mercy. Now, it's a little difficult, 600 or so years down the track, to get a sense of just how awe inspiring this whole scene must have been. Tens of thousands of men are lining up in a field, ready for battle. This wasn't your usual Crusader clash, with a well-ordered Latin Christian army going into battle with a bunch of pagans or Muslim fighters, with individualistic and fluid fighting techniques, dashing in from all sorts of directions then engaging in hand to hand fighting. No, this was a strangely serene start to a battle. Thousands upon thousands of singing men are calmly forming into lines, getting ready to attack each other.

According to William Urban in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", there were six large oak trees in the middle of the field where the armies were lining up, and some men who had wanted a front row seat to the spectacle had climbed the trees and was sitting high up from the ground, waiting for the battle to begin. William Urban points out that no one knows to this day whether the tree-climbers were German, Polish, or Lithuanian, or a combination of the three.

The battle started when the Polish cavalymen, who were stationed on the left wing, moved slowly forwards, still singing their hymn. William Urban speculates that they may have been trying to tempt the Teutonic forces into a cavalry charge, as only the first line of the Polish forces advanced, and they did so slowly, while still singing. The Lithuanians seemed more eager to engage. The entire Lithuanian cavalry force charged forwards and mowed down a number of individual Teutonic fighters who had moved in to engage in skirmishes. Then both sides abandoned their hymn singing and instead let out battle cries, as they surged forwards.

According to William Urban, most of the early fighting centered around, not the experienced Teutonic knights, but the Crusader and mercenary forces. Apparently Grand Master Ulrich had been warned by one of the mercenary commanders before the battle to

make sure that the Teutonic fighters remained in their lines under tight discipline for the duration of the battle because, the mercenary pointed out, the Lithuanian Tartar and pagan fighters were known for using the feigned retreat tactic, and if the Teutonic forces fell for this ruse, their battle lines would be broken and become vulnerable.

The traditional account of the battle by the Polish chronicler Jan Dlugosz, whose work you might remember from last week's episode has been treated more cautiously in recent times, has the Polish fighters clashing valiantly with the Teutonic forces, while Grand Duke Vytautas and the Russian fighters from Smolensk also dug in and fought well. However, according to Jan Dlugosz, the Tartar fighters broke away from the battle and retreated, followed by many of the Lithuanian fighters. Jan Dlugosz declared that this proved that the Polish fighters were brave, courageous men while the Tartars and Lithuanians were a bunch of milk-drinking, cardigan-wearing cowards. However, what Jan Dlugosz failed to appreciate was that the Tartar Lithuanian withdrawal may have been part of a feigned retreat.

If it was a feigned retreat, it worked. The Teutonic Knights held their positions, but the Crusaders and mercenaries fighting on the German side broke out of their lines and raced after the fleeing Tartars and Lithuanians, despite the Grand Master's instruction that they weren't to fall for the old feigned retreat tactic.

While the Tartars, Lithuanians, Crusaders and German mercenaries have now left the battlefield and are racing around trying to catch each other, the first line of Polish cavalry now moved in to fill the gap and began engaging with the Teutonic knights. There was a big push from the Teutonic forces to drive towards the Krakow banner, as the marshal of the Teutonic forces believed that King Jogaila must be fighting near that banner. But he wasn't. At the moment, Jogaila is actually not involved in hand-to-hand fighting, but is safely away to the side with a small group of guards and royal courtiers, directing the battle. Grand Duke Vytautas though, is on the battlefield, and is actively commanding the fighting from the front lines, riding back and forth along the line of clashing fighters, making adjustments to fill weak points, and shouting words of encouragement.

Now, remember how only the first line of Polish cavalrymen rode in at the start of the battle? Well, King Jogaila now gives the signal for the second line of cavalrymen to move forward and engage, and this starts to put all sorts of pressure on the Teutonic fighters. Some of the Crusaders and mercenaries then began reappearing, laden down with booty, and they hurriedly discarded their loot and raced in to assist the Teutonic fighters. But the rest of the Crusaders and mercenaries have been caught up well away from the battlefield, fighting the Tartar and Lithuanian men, who have now stopped fleeing, have turned around, and are pushing the Crusaders and mercenaries back towards the battlefield.

With his core group of Teutonic fighters struggling against the Polish cavalry, and with no sign of any more Crusaders or mercenaries returning to assist them, Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen now has to make a decision. He could order his forces to retreat, but it would be likely that many of them would be cut down by the pursuing Polish cavalry, so instead, he decides to bet everything on one last throw of the dice. He orders sixteen of his best Teutonic units to gather together in a wedge formation, then orders that wedge to charge directly at the Polish lines at an apparent weak point, which also happened to be the place where the Royal Polish banner was flying on a small rise, the place where, the Grand Master figured, Jogaila was probably stationed, on a small hill where he could see the battle.

But the ever elusive Jogaila wasn't on this hill. But he was near it, and in fact William Urban notes that a group of German fighters had, at this point in the battle, recognized him, and they were all pointing their spears at him, trying to identify his position to the Grand Master. The bodyguards assigned to protect Jogaila noticed this and hurriedly removed the royal banner, which was flying near the King's position.

Now you might be wondering why the talented warrior Jogaila is just standing around, not taking part in the biggest battle his forces had ever been involved in? Well, mainly this is happening because Jogaila has no say in the matter. The Polish noblemen and commanders had decided that Jogaila was just too important to risk in hand-to-hand fighting, so Jogaila was encouraged to direct the course of the battle without actually engaging in it. Needless to say, Jogaila was none too happy about this arrangement, and in fact William Urban reports that, at one stage in the battle, his bodyguards were forced to restrain him, as he tried to throw himself into the fray.

Anyway, as the Teutonic wedge was readying itself to charge, Vytautas raced over to Jogaila's position and urged him to engage the rest of the Polish cavalry forces. Jogaila agreed, and the Polish cavalry raced out to intercept the Teutonic wedge, which was by now beginning its charge. The Polish cavalry forces did manage to block the brunt of the Teutonic wedge, but its fighters still made their way over to the Polish lines, and in fact they made it all the way over to where Jogaila was stationed. Jogaila was then able to take part in the action, defending himself against the Teutonic onslaught, although he did need a bit of help.

Legend has it that a Teutonic knight was just about to strike King Jogaila of Poland when the King's secretary, a young priest called Zbigniew Olesnicki, saw what was about to happen, grabbed a broken spear which was lying nearby, and hit the Teutonic knight on the head with it, causing him to fall to the ground. Apparently after this incident, Jogaila wanted to turn Olesnicki into a knight, but Olesnicki said something to the effect of "Thanks for the offer, but I prefer carrying out God's work". Not surprisingly, young Olesnicki rose in Jogaila's estimation after having saved his life, and ended up becoming one of his closest and most trusted advisers.

Anyway, back to the battle. While the Teutonic wedge had managed to make its way over to the Polish lines, the Teutonic fighters were now in all sorts of trouble. Facing fresh Polish cavalymen, the exhausted Teutonic knights found themselves outnumbered and out-classed. As they began to find themselves surrounded by Polish fighters, a devastating event occurred. Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen, who had joined the charge of his prized warriors, was cut down and killed by a knight in the Royal Polish household cavalry force. Another German commander then sounded the call to retreat, but it was too late.

Having just seen their Grand Master being defeated and killed, any chance for an orderly withdrawal was lost as the German knights panicked and fled. Then pretty much the entire Teutonic force was on the run, save for the Crusader and mercenary troops who were still engaged with the Tartar and Lithuanian fighters adjacent to the battlefield. The Polish cavalry fighters turned and chased the fleeing Teutonic fighters. Some of the Germans managed to flee to safety. Others were not so lucky, with some being driven into the nearby forest, some being cut down on the narrow roadways, and others trying to flee across a pond, only to drown in the process.

William Urban reports that some German units managed to make their way back to their camp, but were followed by Polish fighters. The Germans then attempted to make a last stand around their supply wagons, but were hindered by camp followers who were taking the opportunity to loot the wagons and the camp in the chaos. Some Lithuanians returning from fighting the Crusaders and mercenaries assisted the Polish fighters to defeat the group holding out at the wagon camp.

While some of the Germans were taken prisoner (generally those who looked like they could command a hefty ransom), most were killed. The Polish fighters then managed to locate barrels of red German wine in the wagons, and soon everyone was using their helmets, gloves and even their boots as vessels from which to drink the red wine of victory. Word got back to Jogaila of these shenanigans and, worried about the effects of intoxication on his men, he ordered the wine barrels to be smashed. According to William Urban, the wine then flowed down the slopes in small streams, and some onlookers mistook the red liquid for blood, causing stories of "rivers of blood flowing from the battlefield" to circulate.

But despite the presence of the red wine, there was a lot of blood. The casualty rate for this battle was insane. By the end of the day, all the Teutonic fighters had been accounted for. They had either been injured, killed, taken prisoner, or were one of the few fighters lucky enough to have fled to the safety of nearby towns and castles. As William Urban points out, the lowest and most conservative number of those killed at the Battle of Tannenberg is 8,000, which is a massive number of bodies. But as I said, that's the lowest estimate. Many historians calculate the number of dead to be much higher. As William Urban states, and I quote "the losses were almost beyond calculation" end quote.

While the losses amongst the Polish, Lithuanian, Tartar, and Samogitian fighters were high, the losses on the Teutonic side were nothing short of catastrophic. William Urban reports that most of the Teutonic knights who rode into battle that day were either killed outright or later died of their injuries. And of course, one of the many, many bodies laying on the field between the villages of Tannenberg and Grunwald was that of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Ulrich von Jungingen.

But it's not over yet. Remember, the Polish-Lithuanian forces are inside enemy territory. They're in Prussia and are intending to march onwards to the city of Marienberg. Join me next week as we clean up in the aftermath of the Battle of Tannenberg and ready ourselves for the siege of Marienberg. Until next week, bye for now.

This podcast is powered by Patreon. If you can spare \$1 per month and would like to support this podcast, go to [patreon.com](https://patreon.com) and search for "History of the Crusades", or go to our website, [crusadespod.com](https://crusadespod.com), and click on the Patreon link. Your \$1 contribution will mean you get access to an extra episode every fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and it means that you are powering the History of the Crusades podcast. Thank you to all who have signed up so far.

End